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WASHINGTON POST
20 February 1987

State Dept. Acted to Block U.S.-Egypt Attack on Libya

White House Envisioned Aiding a 1985 Invasion

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The State Department took extraordinary steps in the summer of 1985, including summoning the U.S. ambassador to Egypt home on a secret weekend mission, to head off a White House-sponsored plan for a joint U.S.-Egyptian military attack on Libya, according to informed sources.

As in the case of its Iran policy, the U.S. government was bitterly divided, with leaders of the State and Defense departments trying to block what they believed were risky and unrealistic White House and CIA initiatives aimed at winning a quick victory over Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

The confidential efforts of U.S. Ambassador Nicholas A. Veliotis were aimed at rebutting the dramatic proposals of "these madmen in the White House," as the free-wheeling National Security Council staff was known at that time in the upper echelons of the State Department. Veliotis, who was told to let no one know of his presence in Washington, was informed that Secretary of State George P. Shultz was unalterably opposed to the plan, which called for an Egyptian invasion of Libya, and considered it "crazy."

Libya under the radical leadership of Gadhafi has been an urgent concern, some say an obsession, in the White House throughout the years of this administration. President Reagan's initial meeting with his National Security Council on his first full day in office, Jan. 21, 1981, focused on Libya and Iran. In mid-1985, emboldened by Reagan's overwhelming reelection and frustrated by four years of indecisive struggle against Gadhafi through covert actions and unconventional means, senior figures in the White House and Central Intelligence Agency called for a direct military confrontation, according to sources who provided information for this article.

The 17-day televised ordeal of hijacked TWA Flight 847 in June 1985 precipitated a shift in U.S. policies toward both Libya and Iran. The hijacking dramatized U.S. vulnerability to terrorism in the Middle East and fed White House determination to take strong action.

Iran's influence in the freeing of the TWA passengers and crew from terrorists in Lebanon suggested that an opening to Tehran

could help free the remaining U.S. hostages held by pro-Iranian groups. The thinking about Libya went in the other direction: Although there was no direct connection between Libya and the TWA hijacking, top officials at the NSC and CIA became determined to get tough with Libya, the most vulnerable of the terrorism-generating states to U.S. action.

The drive by senior NSC staff officials at this critical juncture "was to embrace the Ayatollah [Ruhollah Khomeini] and demolish Gadhafi," said an administration official who was involved in the policy-making. "It was not particularly rational, but [TWA] 847 had exposed the absence of both a real antiterrorist capability and policy toward the states supporting terrorism."

A mid-July 1985, paper written by Robert M. Gates, then head of intelligence analysis for the agency and now Reagan's nominee to be CIA director, reported that a U.S.-Egyptian operation against Libya would present an opportunity "to redraw the map of North Africa," according to sources who have read the document. Then-CIA director William J. Casey, according to reliable sources, ordered a detailed study of military targets in Libya that would be subject to U.S. attack.

A plan drawn up by the National Security Council staff at this point called for Egypt to attack Libya, capture half its territory with U.S. air support and then use this position to force Gadhafi from power, several sources said. It had been devised by then-national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane, his deputy, Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, and the third-ranking NSC aide, Donald Fortier.

In the White House and NSC, the top-secret plan to oust Gadhafi was given the code word FLOWER; a CIA component to undermine Gadhafi covertly was called TULIP, and the plan for a U.S.-Egyptian military action was ROSE.

The State Department was not opposed in principle to cooperating with Egypt against its radical neighbor, Libya; the United States had been doing so for years. However, a joint invasion of Libya was considered by State—and by its allies

among the civilian and uniformed leadership of the Pentagon—to be ill-considered and highly risky in the unlikely event that Egypt's cautious President Hosni Mubarak should agree to pursue it.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a study apparently intended to dampen White House enthusiasm for an invasion plan, estimated that an operation in Libya on the scale being envisioned could eventually require six U.S. combat divisions, about 90,000 troops. Such a force, which is about 15 times greater than that employed in the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada, would have required a major diversion of U.S. forces from NATO.

The secret trip home by Veliotis on orders from Shultz was considered a means of adding caution, and professional assessment, to the high-level discussions in Washington. The ambassador, who was familiar with bureaucratic infighting from his service as assistant secretary of state for near-eastern affairs early in the administration, was given access to the planning documents under study at the White House. He was asked to rewrite them into something that could be acceptable to the Egyptians and useful to the United States.

Instead of a joint military action against Libya, the State-drafted paper proposed U.S.-Egyptian military "contingency planning" on an accelerated basis in case of a clash with Libya, closer U.S.-Egyptian cooperation against Libyan activities in the Sudan and Chad and other "reactive and defensive scenarios," according to a source familiar with it.

Veliotis also recommended that a way be found to block a proposed mission to Cairo by Poindexter to discuss war plans with Mubarak, on grounds that such a high-level messenger would give unwarranted and unwise emphasis to the message.

Despite the opposition from State, Reagan approved a mission to Cairo by Poindexter and Fortier, which took place over Labor Day weekend 1985. But State believed it was successful in watering down what Poindexter was authorized to tell Mubarak and his defense minister, Field Marshal Abdul-Halim Abu Ghazala, so that the admiral's

"talking points" were much closer to the State Department paper than to the original plan for joint military action.

Poindexter began the meeting with Mubarak by emphasizing that he had been sent by Reagan and was speaking for him. He then launched into a discussion of the military situation, according to a report on the meeting, including reiteration of a pledge from Reagan of U.S. backing in case Egypt attacked Libya. Such a pledge had been extracted by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat from President Gerald R. Ford in the early 1970s, withdrawn by President Jimmy Carter in 1977 due to concern about such an open-ended U.S. commitment and reinstated by Reagan in late 1981.

There is controversy within the government about whether, or to what extent, Poindexter hoped to persuade Mubarak to consider U.S.-Egyptian military action against Libya, despite the watering down of Poindexter's formal instructions. Before Poindexter could complete his talking points, according to a U.S. report on the meeting, the impatient Egyptian president interrupted him.

"Look, admirak," the Egyptian president said, "when we decide to attack Libya it will be our decision and on our timetable."

Despite Mubarak's caution, military "contingency planning" between Cairo and Washington continued. State Department officials believed this planning, which included a trip to Cairo in February 1986, by Lt. Gen. Dale A. Vesser, chief of plans and policy for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was within the existing guidelines of U.S.-Egyptian "defensive" activity. Other sources reported, however, that the planning continued to include elements of a joint U.S.-Egyptian attack.

The U.S. military actions taken against Libya in the months that followed—including a major bombing attack last April—were limited in scope and duration, and were unilateral U.S. moves.

Military strikes against Libya were considered at the White House following the Dec. 27, 1985, bombings at the Rome and Vienna airports. The proposals were shelved after opposition from the Defense Department and a CIA report that the terrorist attacks appeared to be the work of the Abu Nidal terrorist group and could not be traced to Libya.

Planning continued, however, on a major U.S. naval and air exercise in the Gulf of Sidra, off Libya, which Gadhafi insists is Libyan territorial waters despite the fact that most other nations consider the gulf to be international waters. It was well known in the administration, according to several sources, that Gadhafi was likely to react militarily.

The rules of engagement for the exercise, named Prairie Fire, indicated that Reagan was likely to approve attacks on five Libyan military targets on the coast if there were a single U.S. casualty. There were no casualties, but when Libyan forces fired missiles at U.S. warplanes last March 24, the swift response was a U.S. attack on an on-shore Libyan missile site and destruction of at least two Libyan patrol boats.

The following day Gadhafi announced publicly that, "It is a time for confrontation—for war" with the United States. The same day, coded messages were intercepted by U.S. agencies from Tripoli to Libyan People's Bureaus or embassies, in eight countries including East Germany directing them to undertake operations against American targets and facilities.

The bombing of a West Berlin discotheque loaded with U.S. military personnel on April 5, apparently in compliance with the March 25 instructions from Tripoli, triggered the U.S. bombing raid April 14 against Gadhafi's headquarters and other targets in Libya.

Although Gadhafi seemed humbled by the raid, it did not achieve the major Reagan goal of removing him from power. In mid-August last year, the president signed a National Security Decision Directive stating that he still sought a "regime change" in Libya, and directed the CIA to conduct a campaign of "disinformation" to make Gadhafi think that he was about to be attacked again by the United States or ousted by his closest aides.

U.S. intelligence has reported recently that as Iranian influence has declined in Lebanon, Libyan agents have expanded their contacts with the radical Hezbollah faction that is thought to be holding five of the eight U.S. hostages.

According to these reports, Libya has offered Hezbollah money and the use of its terrorist support structure in Europe. An official familiar with the reports said Libya

has probably concluded from the U.S. arms sales to Iran that, "If you have influence with Hezbollah, the United States sells weapons to you instead of dropping bombs."

Staff researcher Barbara Feinman contributed to this report.